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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR DICARLO, EUR/SCE; NSC FOR BRAUN; OSD FOR FLORY

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SUBJECT: BOSNIA: CROATIAN, SERBIAN ENVOYS DOWNPLAY BELGRADE, ZAGREB ROLE IN POLITICS HERE

Classified By: Ambassador Douglas L. McElhaney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In separate meetings, the Croatian and Serbian ambassadors to Bosnia and Herzegovina September 22 discussed the upcoming Bosnian elections. On recent activities of Croatian and Serbian politicians with respect to Bosnia, both emphasized their countries' desire to see Bosnia progress quickly on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration, and said that the actions of their governments had not contributed to the nationalist rhetoric prevalent in the electoral campaign. The two also said they were confident that the harsh pre-election rhetoric would soften after the elections, and would not hamper talks on formation of a Bosnian government. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Ambassador met separately September 22 with Croatian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina Josip Vrbosic and Serbian Ambassador Grujica Spasovic to discuss the upcoming elections in Bosnia, as well as recent activities by Croatian and Serbian political leaders relevant to Bosnia. Both Ambassadors were keen to emphasize their nations' interest in Bosnia progressing on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration. Vrbosic noted Croatian PM Sanader had endorsed the "Croat Togetherness" coalition (HDZ-1990 and four small Croat parties) because it presented the best hope to fix "broken" Croat politics in Bosnia. He said that HDZ-BiH, under the "illegitimate" leadership of Dragan Covic (who won the most recent party election for president by what was widely perceived as a rigged vote) was not an effective advocate for Croat interests and could not be seen as an equal partner with parties representing other ethnic groups in the governing of Bosnia.

¶3. (C) The Serb Spasovic had a similar message, noting that Serbia's recent announcement of a "special ties" agreement with the Republika Srpska (RS) was merely a technical update of a similar agreement signed with Serbia and Montenegro in ¶2001. He did, however, acknowledge that the timing likely was chosen to boost the standing of Serbs in the upcoming elections in Bosnia and the Kosovo status talks.

¶4. (C) Both ambassadors agreed that the overwhelmingly negative election rhetoric in Bosnia was a problem, but neither seemed particularly concerned that it would continue after the election. When asked about the role of Croatian and Serbian politicians in the Bosnia election campaign, both ambassadors asserted their governments were not contributing to the nationalist rhetoric. Croatian Ambassador Vrbosic said that the leaders of HDZ-1990 are not nationalists, and

would be constructive after the elections. He agreed with Ambassador McElhaney that there would be continuing debate about the path of constitutional reform, particularly regarding tensions between individual and group rights, and suggested that constitutional negotiations should restart within the state parliament instead of among political leaders. Vrbosic said "new faces" were needed to improve the state of Bosnian politics. The Ambassador responded that until the constitutional structure is changed, there was little hope that new leaders would emerge.

15. (C) Spasovic claimed that although RS PM Dodik recently had been using nationalist rhetoric, he was merely tacking right. His real political orientation was center-left. The Ambassador responded that in doing so, Dodik was calling into question his willingness to contribute to practical solutions for BiH, as well as destabilizing the political climate here during the election period. Spasovic agreed, but said that, due to "nervousness" in Belgrade over Kosovo, Serbian politicians were trying to generate some positive news with respect to Bosnia. That included the "special agreement" on largely economic issues to be signed September 26 between Banja Luka and Belgrade. He said he was optimistic that political rhetoric would moderate after the elections, and the debate could turn to concrete issues.

16. (C) COMMENT: Both Ambassadors were keen to emphasize that neither of their governments had any intention to contribute to the radicalization of the political situation in Bosnia. They denied that Sanader's open support for the highly-nationalist HDZ-1990, as well as Belgrade's highly visible efforts to demonstrate their close relations with Serb front-runner Milorad Dodik were doing so. We made clear that under the Dayton Agreement Serbia and Croatia must protect the stability of BiH, not exacerbate tensions among

SARAJEVO 00002268 002 OF 002

the three "peoples," particularly during the election campaign. Their messages were very similar -- that membership for Bosnia in Euro-Atlantic structures was in the interests of their countries. Both agreed that constitutional change must occur before Bosnia can join the EU, but neither offered any constructive suggestions on how to realize reforms. END SUMMARY.

MCELHANEY